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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000912

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [UNSC](#) [AID](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: CHARGE'S TRIP TO NABATIEH TO VISIT USG
ASSISTANCE RECIPIENTS

REF: A. BEIRUT 786
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 571

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) On June 18, the Charge, visiting State Department Policy Planning staff member, and EmbOffs visited five sites of which the Embassy sponsors development, social assistance, and education projects in Nabatieh in southern Lebanon. The traveling party also attended a luncheon at the home of Abdallah Bitar, a prominent Shia businessman aligned with anti-Hizballah figure Ahmad al Assad. During the luncheon, demonstrators gathered outside of Bitar's home, chanting slogans against Bitar and the U.S. The traveling party departed the residence safely; one Embassy vehicle was left behind until it was towed, due to mechanical failure, and two Embassy bodyguards suffered light contusions when hit by rocks thrown by the gathered men. President Michel Sleiman, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, PM Advisor Mohamed Chatah, Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh, Saad Hariri's advisor Ghattas Khoury, and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's advisor Ali Hamdan and many others all telephoned the Charge to convey their concern and to express their disapproval of the demonstrators' actions. End summary.

MUNICIPALITY OF HABBOUCH

[1](#)2. (U) In a June 18 trip to Nabatieh in southern Lebanon, the Charge, visiting State Department Policy Planning staff member Jared Cohen, and EmbOffs met with the Mayor of Habbouch Sami Hallal, a member of Speaker Nabih Berri's Amal Movement, and members of the Habbouch Municipal Council. They discussed the \$19 million USAID project working with 800 municipalities nationwide, including the Municipality of Habbouch, to provide technical assistance to standardize and streamline financial and administrative procedures. The Mayor spoke of his concern for the health, general safety, and environment of Habbouch, and its need for a waste water treatment facility. He commented on the polluted Litani River which provides water to the municipality.

[1](#)3. (U) According to the Mayor, UNDP has been planning to build a recycling plant, but the community has opposed the project, believing it would create a mountain of garbage in its town. He also spoke of a need for vocational training, a

computer center, books for a library, (he showed us the space in his building where it could be located), and health care assistance. The mayor welcomed further USAID assistance to the municipality.

WOMEN'S PROGRESS ASSOCIATION

¶4. (U) The Charge also visited the Women's Progress Association NGO, where USAID provided \$50,000 to the association for medical equipment and kitchen supplies, among other resources. The president of the association mentioned that the NGO's day care center for children allows working mothers to go to work knowing their children are well-cared for. It is Nabatieh's first day care center and now provides elder care as well. She noted that the association needs a larger water tank than what it currently uses. The President also expressed an interest in USAID assistance with the association's community, especially to the elderly community which her building also services, and in implementing income generation activities, such as a small cafeteria.

NABATIEH HIGH SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

¶5. (U) The next visit was to the Nabatieh Public High School for Girls, another recipient of USAID assistance (through US NGO partner Mercy Corps). The Charge met with the principal and two high-achieving students. Commenting on the impact of the July 2006 war on the school's ability to hold classes, the principal spoke of the formation of an advisory council,

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composed of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. This council, called by the principal the "nucleus of continued cooperation," facilitated Mercy Corps' assistance during the war and strategized about how to improve the school, which led to the building a basketball court. The students lamented that they wish to participate in politics, but that the government "tries to overcome youth involvement by deciding things for them." One student concluded that young people turn to violence and criminal activities, because there is no constructive role for them in politics.

¶6. (U) Showing us the school's computer lab, the principal explained that the Ministry of Education does not fund the expensive internet fees. Thus, the school struggles to provide internet service to the students and to community members who continue to use the center after they graduate high school and do not go on to college. The principal noted that Intel Corporation has been attempting to work with the Ministry of Education, but that the ministry did not consider IT to be a top priority. The principal also complained that the school lacks a generator, therefore its operations suffer from power outages. He welcomed continued U.S. assistance.

KAMEL YOUSSEF JABER SOCIAL CENTER

¶7. (U) At the Kamel Youssef Jaber Cultural and Social Center, the Charge met with executive director, Maria Assi, who described the recent USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) grant to engage youth in community development, involving 180 youth from throughout the country. The director spoke of forming an official union coordinating all of the efforts of NGOs focused on youth in Lebanon. Ms. Assi commented on the need for IT services and linkages with the private sector, and welcomed continued U.S. support. We also visited the American Corner in the Jaber Center, where the Embassy Public Diplomacy Section has provided equipment and library materials for all ages.

LUNCHEON WITH HEAD OF NABATIEH CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

18. (C) The traveling party then proceeded to the residence of Abdallah Bitar (Refs A, B), who is aligned with Ahmad al Assad, an anti-Hizballah Shia political figure. Bitar, a prominent Shia businessman and head of the Nabatieh Traders Association and the Economists Union, had invited the Charge to his home, where the Embassy group met his wife and nine children (including quintuplets), all of whom, like Abdallah Bitar, are Amcits. (Note: We had offered to meet Bitar in a local restaurant, but he had preferred to host us in his home. End note.)

19. (C) Bitar recounted for the group his May trip to the U.S. with Ahmad al Assad, and the ensuing threats made against him and his family by Hizballah in protest of his trip. He added that he believed he has weathered much of this criticism, noting that he regularly receives large numbers of visitors during the evenings. Bitar, who told the group that their visit was "a very good thing," said USAID assistance could benefit the Economists Association in Nabatieh.

110. (C) After 20 minutes of discussion with Bitar, the press joined the party and inquired about the USAID municipality project and other USAID assistance to Nabatieh. The press departed and 15 minutes into the lunch (about 45 minutes after arrival at the Bitar residence), it became clear that a number of men had gathered outside of Bitar's home and were chanting slogans against Bitar and the U.S. A crestfallen Hassan, Bitar's 17-year old son, relayed that some of his high school friends were outside shouting. At that point, there were about 15 individuals gathered; the number increased to about 30 soon thereafter.

111. (C) The Embassy group decided to leave out of concern for a shaken Mrs. Bitar. At that time, some men picked up stones and threw them at the Embassy bodyguards, who were running alongside the convoy. One bodyguard was hit in the leg by a ricocheting rock, and another was hit in the arm. (Both

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suffered contusions but did not require hospitalization.)

112. (C) The convoy stopped a short distance from the home down the road when one of the vehicles stalled. Although local press reported the car was "knocked out," in actuality, it stalled due to mechanical failure. Many more individuals gathered at the stalled vehicle, as many as 100. Once the Internal Security Forces (ISF) arrived (in Dodge Chargers provided by the USG earlier this month), two bodyguards stayed behind with the vehicle and the rest of the convoy returned to the Embassy without further incident. (The vehicle was later towed away without incident for repair.)

113. (C) President Michel Sleiman, PM Advisor Mohamed Chatah, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh, Saad Hariri's advisor Ghattas Khoury, and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's advisor Ali Hamdan all telephoned the Charge to convey their concern and to express their disapproval of the demonstrators' action. Speaking for Berri, Hamdan noted he was disappointed with the ISF's slow response and is investigating why the police was delayed.

114. (C) Bitar appeared on television in the evening and dispelled the notion that this had been a "secret" meeting, as had been reported on Hizballah Al Manar TV broadcast. He also noted that he had informed local authorities including Berri and Hizballah MP Mohammed Raad, prior to the visit, in accordance with protocol.

115. (U) Most June 19 newspapers reported on the both the visits and the security incident and moderate an-Nahar newspaper, Arab nationalist As-Safir, and pro-Sunni al-Liwa described the visits at length repeating the Charge's statement, "This assistance is a gift from the American people." In these accounts, the security incident receiving minimal coverage.

¶16. (U) Local press and media also focused on the U.S. Department of Treasury's actions against a Venezuelan diplomat and two Venezuelan-based travel agencies, Byblos and Hallal accused of providing financial support to Hizballah.

¶17. (C) Comment: Although the 75-year old mayor of Habbouch evaded answering a question posed by Charge on how he viewed Secretary Rice's June 16 statement on Sheba'a Farms, others in Nabatieh responded positively to the statement but also underlined the need for concrete results in the near future.
End Comment.
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